In the Years of the Horse

VICTORIANS LOVED

A CENTURY AGO, Victorians did their local travelling by horse and canoe. There was a trail through the heavy woods from Victoria to Esquimalt, and horseback was the favorite means of getting from one place to the other.

Some people, however, went by boat—a pleasant sail, or a canoe ride.

The Crown Colony of British Columbia wasn't two years old, when Victorians were startled by this announcement:

"Important arrival—by the Brother Jonathan on Saturday an omnibus of the regular New York style arrived from San Francisco. During the afternoon it was drawn about town by four fine horses, and on Saturday conveyed loads of passengers, in search of recreation, to Beacon Hill and Esquimalt."

That omnibus, as far as we can learn today, was Victoria's as ell as British Columbia's first public transportation. And, in the years since, Victorians have used every known kind . . . horse-drawn carriager, bicycles, street cars, buses.

By 1864 so many people here were demanding omnibuses for rides into the country that a local firm started manufacturing them as noted in the press.

"We are pleased to observe at the workshop of Messrs. Mason and Gerrow, carriage makers, Government Street, a fine omnibus being constructed, the first we believe, manufactured on the Island. The principal wood used in its construction is poplar, which, from the closeness of its grain and its pliability, is peculiarly adapted to the purpose. The vehicle will be handed over to the painters in a few days, and ready for local use within the course of a month."

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William G. Bowman was an early-day stable owner in Victoria. In 1861, he built a stable on Broad Street, opposite the east end of Trounce Alley. The press said:

"The stables are lofty and airy, well lighted and drained and most conveniently arranged. In securing the animals the halter will be discarded, and a strap across the entrance of the stall substituted."

In the memoirs of Jack "Long Gun" Irvine, he tells of a rival to Mr. Bowman as follows: "Another livery stable was in Trounce Alley; the proprietor was Lord John Russel, the man who introduced the hansom cab to Victoria. I never knew why he was called Lord John Russel. I think it was because he put on lots of fancy airs. Just the same, he sure could come out in style with his fancy rigs."

Victorians had a fine time in the winter snows, as we learn from "Long Gun" Irvine: "In winter, when there was snow and good sleighing, Lord John sure took the cake with his fancy sleighs and fine horses. A sleigh ride with him would put you back $2.50 an hour, and, believe it or not, his time was always taken up from morning to midnight."

What happened to Lord John Russel we know not, but William Bowman, who loved horses died in 1903: "Death—was the result of an accident suffered some weeks ago—Mr. Bowman's buggy was hit by a street car, and he was thrown out."

The first Victoria mayor, in 1862, Thomas Harris, a florid-faced, genial butcher—"an 'umble tradesman" he delighted in calling himself—was a good horseman, and daily rode through the city streets, making sure civic business was in good shape—and making sure, as best he was able, that he was popular with the voters.

John Pidwell was a prominent gentleman of the time, a pillar of community strength—a teetotaller, a non-smoker—but a fiend for speed on horesback, so much so that he was a worry to his wife and family and his friends, who swore that a horse would be the death of him, and so it was, as we read in the press:

". . . the wind was blowing fresh from the south, raising a cloud of dust in the street, and rendering it difficult to discern objects for any great distance. Just as Mr. Pidwell reached the Esquimalt Road, a buggy turned the corner. The driver of the buggy—Mr. W. G. Bowman—having his back towards the wind and his vision consequently obstructed, turned his horses to the side of the road to avoid coming in contact with Mr. Pidwell, who, having one hand raised to keep his hat from blowing off, was unable to see the danger and was riding at full speed directly upon him; but the precaution was of no avail. The side of Mr. Pidwell's horse struck the pole of Mr. Bowman's carriage with great violence, breaking the pole and shattering the front part of the carriage. The horse fell and poor Mr. Pidwell was thrown out of the saddle with great violence, and his head, coming in contact with one of the front wheels of the carriage, was fractured in a nost shocking manner."

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There were some elegant horse-drawn carriages here, too. The top coachmen for many years were Robert Winter, and his sons George and Robert. The senior Winter was coachman at Cary Castle, the home of the governor; George Winter for years drove the handsome carriage of Mr. and Mrs. James Dunsmuir, and Robert, Sr., was the coachman for Mr. Justice P. A. Irving. Mr. and Mrs. B. W. Pearse of "Fernwood," had a carriage, and so did Mr. and Mrs. R. P. Rithet of "Hollybank." All the coachmen wore livery.

This was the hackney cab which did a thriving trade in Victoria half a century and more ago.

In 1871 there was a new transportation sensation in Victoria:

"Patent steam omnibus—one of Nairn's patent steam omnibuses, to carry 30 passengers, is on the way to this colony, under consignment to Messrs. Janion, Rhodes and Company. The weight of the omnibus when complete, is about five tons; the engines and boiler are capable of working up to 20 horsepower, which is only necessary when ascending steep gradients. When on a level, or nearly level road, a speed of 15 miles an hour is easily attained, and everything is under the perfect control of the driver. Running at that speed the omnibus can be stopped in much less time and space than the ordinary horse bus."

The 1890's were a memorable era in Victoria. The streetcars started operation, the motor cars commenced to arrive and many people were riding bicycles like crazy.

Motor cars were first looked upon as nothing more than a novelty that wouldn't last long.

Not so the streetcar; everyone said they were here to stay, and they did stay in Victoria—until 1948, and in Vancouver a little later than that.

Curious Victorians saw the streetcars as they were taken off various ships in the harbor. Most of them were old ones, discarded in Seattle, San Francisco or even farther away.

It was in February, 1890, that streetcars began operating. Of a test run we read:

"Yesterday the new streetcars were seen for the first time on Government Street, the No. 3 having an excursion party of representative citizens aboard. Everything ran smoothly."

The speed was positively startling, and there were many citizens who said they'd stay with their horses.

"The entire route to the end of Superior Street, in the west, and to the end of Fort Street, in the east, was traveled at speeds ranging from six to 12 miles per hour," one report says. "Despite the speed, the cars ran smoothly, starting and stopping with little or no jar and proving thoroughly obedient to the motor, so smoothly, in fact, was their running that in crossing the James Bay bridge at full speed they did not create the slightest oscillation."

CORKS POPPED IN WELCOME

There was much worry about the effect of the cars on the horses, but all went well.

"Some of the city's teams were alarmed at the unusual spectacle of the rapidly moving vehicles of comfort and convenience, with no visible means of propulsion, but no runaways were recorded; and, with care, the drivers on the road hope to avoid any accidents, even while breaking in the city's horses to the sight of the cars," one writer observed.

On Feb. 21, 1890, the regular streetcar service was inaugurated. "About 200 prominent gentlemen, including Lieut.-Governor Hugh Nelson, Premier John Robson and Mayor John Grant, gathered at the power house, Rock Bay Bridge — champagne was opened and all present drank to the success of the road so auspiciously inaugurated," we are informed.

"Along the line many citizens decorated their places of business and stood smiling at their doors as the procession of four streetcars passed.

"The run to the Outer Wharf was made in 11 minutes, cars were there changed, and 17 minutes later the cars were at the Fountain, at the junction of Government and Douglas Streets. From the Fountain, to the Jubilee Hospital, the terminus of the Fort Street route—was made in about 20 minutes."

They were free and easy days, and there's the story of one young gentleman who lived at the top of Fort Street. His best girl lived down Fort, at the corner of Vancouver. He took the streetcar down the hill, and the motorman waited for him while he ran in and collected his beloved, and returned with her to the car for the remainder of the trip downtown. When there was a big dance in Assembly Hall there were special cars at 2 a.m.

Soon the streetcar lines were extended into the country and to seaside resorts—to Esquimalt, to Foul Bay, to Oak Bay, to Mount Tolmie, to Cloverdale.